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2017

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**Visualizing Invisible Cities**

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# **Visualizing Invisible Cities**

**by**

**Yi-Tai Chung, B.F.A.**

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

May 2017

## **Dedication**

My thesis is dedicated to artists who work with light.

## **Acknowledgements**

A multitude of gratitude for the support given by the following individuals: Bruno-Pierre Houle, Kelsey Vidic, and Jon Haas for artistic communications, Po-Shun Wang, Chun-Kang Chen, Jiajing Qi for technical supports, and Megan Alrutz, Richard Isackes, and Michelle Habeck for advising my research journey.

## **Abstract**

### **Visualizing Invisible Cities**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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My thesis investigates how content in stories arouses and translates into different forms including writing, photography, installation, and lighting design. *Visualizing Invisible Cities* is inspired by Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*. The development follows performance design process including text analysis, deep research, and translation of ideas from written text to visual language. The project development occurs in a three-step process, including a quotation project, a photography project, and an installation project, over a period of two years. The quotation project, *#invisiblecities #italocalvino #mandarin #quote*, started from reading both English and traditional Chinese translations of the book in order to approach the content and to observe how ideas are realized in different translations. The project extracted 12 quotes from *Invisible Cities* to see the content in another way and to find my own perspective of the work. The photography project, *Visualizing Invisible Cities - Taipei*, translated the thematic idea of duality from the book format into photography format. The project of 12 photos captures ephemeral scenes combining sight and reflection in Taipei. The installation project, my

thesis presentation, attempts to transform inspirations from *Invisible Cities*' writing method and Italo Calvino's philosophy of literature by exploring reflectivity and materiality in a designed installation space.

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## Introduction

I have liked reading since I was a child. I enjoy retelling stories and adapting stories into different forms. This process brings an old story to life by recomposing or adding a new lens of today. I am curious about the translation process that generates new meanings from existing content. I commit to the continuous development of adapting content into different forms and retelling stories. Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* was chosen as the essential inspiration for my thesis project because of the openness and ambiguity of the story content. The stories can be approached and interpreted from different perspectives. *Invisible Cities* resonates my background of multi-culture, bilingual, and foreignness.

Starting with my identities, I explored my visual imagination of *Invisible Cities* and entitled my thesis project *Visualizing Invisible Cities*. This thesis project investigates how content in stories arouses and translates into different forms including writing, photography, installation, and lighting design. This development is composed through a three-step process including a quotation project, a photography project, and an installation project.

*"The real work consists not in its definitive form,  
but in the series of approximations made to attain it."*

*(Calvino, 1988)*

## Chapter 1: Quotation Project

Marco Polo, the main character in *Invisible Cities*, shared his journey with Kublai Khan by showing him objects and using body gestures before he was able to learn Kublai Khan's language at the beginning of the story. These symbols and gestures remained in Kublai Khan's memories even after hearing the stories with clearer and detailed information through the language. The quotation project was inspired by the ideas of unforgettable symbols and the language barrier.

The quotation project, *#invisiblecities #italocalvino #mandarin #quote*, starts from reading both English and traditional Chinese translations of the book in order to approach the content and to observe how ideas are realized in different translations. The project extracts 12 quotes from *Invisible Cities* to see the content in another way and to find my own perspective of the work. The selected 12 quotes are being handwritten in traditional Chinese, and the pictures of handwritten quotes are posted on Instagram with typed English translation. The idea of the handwriting process came from Chinese calligraphy. The purpose of depicting the patterns was to approach the meaning of sentences for me as an artist. The posting on Instagram practice was inspired by story content. I, as Marco Polo, presented my journey to the public, which is mainly English speakers in this case, through both symbols and clear language. The whole process started in Spring 2016 and was redone in Winter 2016.

The title *#invisiblecities #italocalvino #mandarin #quote* come from the hashtags for the 12 posts on *visualizing\_invisible\_cities*, an Instagram account created for this thesis project. Hashtags, extracting main ideas from a post, deconstruct the original

content in the post. A series of individual labels typed at the end of a post actually reconstructs the post. This idea is inspired from the *Invisible Cities*' writing method that sees the cities as a many-faceted structure.

## Quotation 1

*“The new fact received a meaning from that emblem  
and also added to the emblem a new meaning.”*

This quote spurs the whole thesis project, which investigates the relationship between content and format. The idea of receiving and adding meaning opens possibilities other than that of a linear development process for my thesis journey. Although the quotation project, the photography project, and the installation project started in sequence, the previous projects kept growing as the following projects developed. Eventually, the three-step development constructed a multifaceted structure that supports others and offers the audience another perspective to view the work. This three-step development process resonated

*Invisible Cities*’ writing method. “I built up a many-faceted structure in which each brief text is close to the others in a series that does not imply logical sequence or a hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions,” (Calvino, 1988) Italo Calvino illustrated at his last published work *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

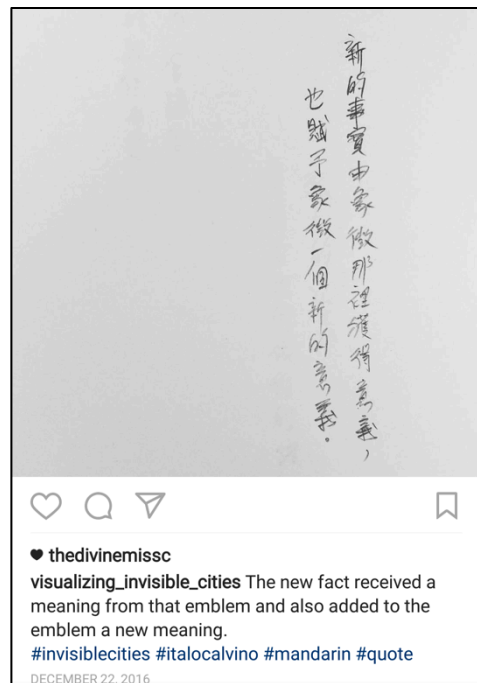


Illustration 1: Quote 1 on Instagram

## Quotation 2

*“The traveler's past changes according to the route he has followed.”*

This quote demonstrates the relationship between the development process and the final product. This quote also draws attention from the scientifically linear time and causality to human central experience of now. The three-step development of *Visualizing Invisible Cities* is not prearranged at the beginning. The three projects are generated and adjusted as the whole thesis project grows. The quotation project has been edited multiple times. Sentences have been changed and trimmed. The composition of 12 quotes has been rearranged and rewritten on notebooks. Also, the photography project has been retaken as well based upon the changing perspective and understanding of the work. As I investigated, I have seen and learned new things from my own work.

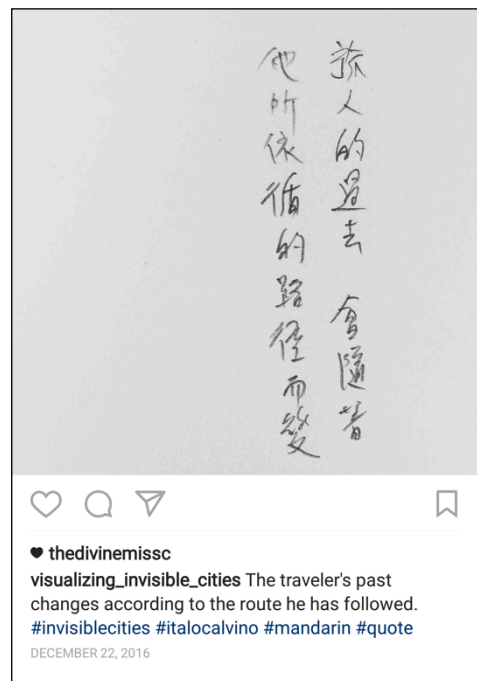


Illustration 2: Quote 2 on Instagram

### Quotation 3

*“The foreigner had learned to speak the emperor’s language  
or the emperor to understand the language of the foreigner.”*

This quote resonated my identity as an international student in the United States entering my third year. Communication, for me, is a dual arrow between speakers and listeners. This quote is also a metaphor for the relationship between an artwork and its viewers. I identified what should be clearer and what should remain ambiguous in order to stimulate viewers’ imagination for my three projects. I aimed to build an opened-interpreted work allowing a multi-viewing experience. I hope the viewing experience communicates with viewers’ minds rather than feeding their eyes.

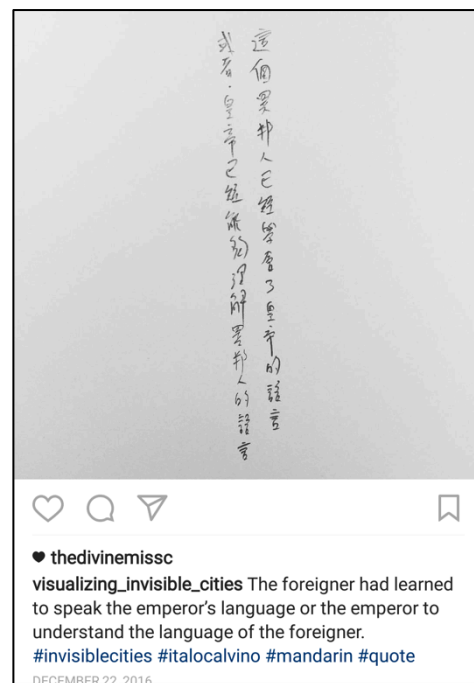


Illustration 3: Quote 3 on Instagram



#### Quotation 4

*“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”*

This quote presents another aspect of all cities described in the book. All the cities could be seen as metamorphoses of desires and fears, while they could be read as Marco Polo’s travel experience. “In my *Invisible Cities* every concept and value turns out to be double—even exactitude.” (Calvino, 1988) The thematic idea of duality is translated into the photography project and the installation project. The photography project captures ephemeral scenes combining sight and reflection in Taipei. The installation project creates objects with reflected materials and generates lighting pattern through the reflective objects.

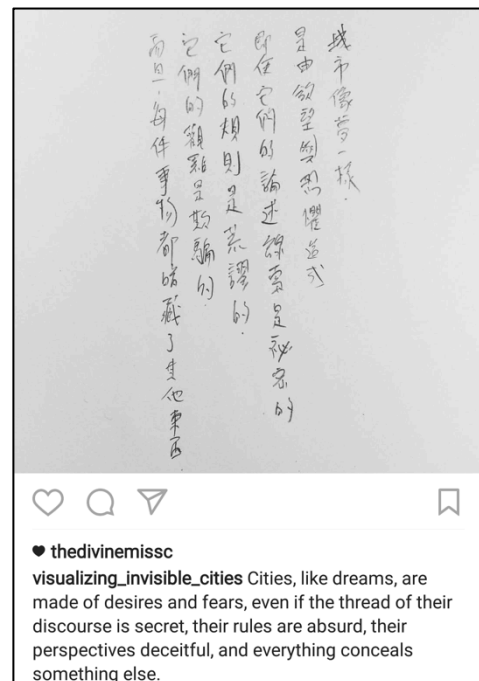


Illustration 4: Quote 4 on Instagram

## Quotation 5

*“The city exists and it has a simple secret: it knows only departures, not returns.”*

This quote illustrates that time is another factor affecting how we perceive a city. I noticed that Calvino captures many short and unforgettable street scenes through the traveler’s eyes in *Invisible Cities*. These ephemeral moments influenced my perspective in the next step. I tried to catch reflections of people in Taipei through reflective materials, such as mirrors, glass, and water. The combination of site and reflections only exists in the moment. All photos for the project are single-shot and non-edited. The sixth photo of the project captures a pregnant lady in a Starbucks through a glass window, which reflects moving vehicles on the street. I, adopting *Invisible Cities*’ writing skill, present ephemeral scenes by capturing the contrast of stillness and motion.

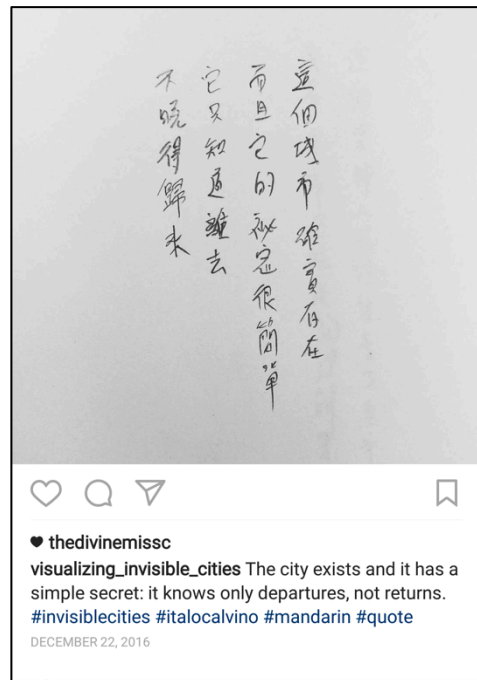


Illustration 5: Quote 5 on Instagram

## Quotation 6

*“If you want to know how much darkness there is around you,  
you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance.”*

This is a quote describes how a visual image leads me to further investigate the imaginative process. Calvino mentioned this in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* visibility section, “we may distinguish between two types of imaginative process: the one that starts with the word and arrives at visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression.” (Calvino, 1988)

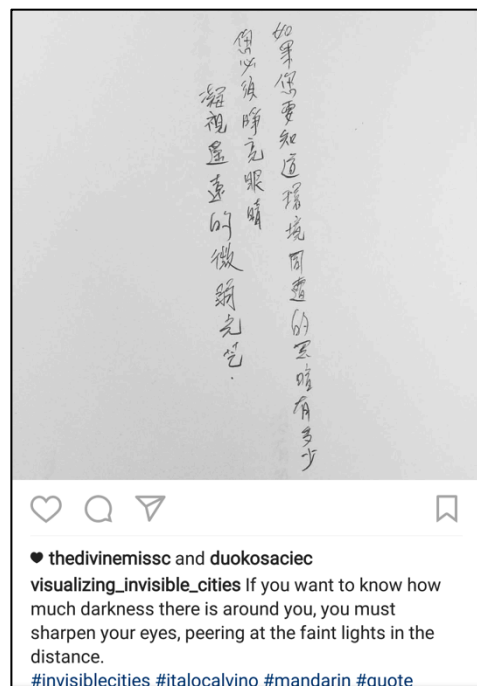


Illustration 6: Quote 6 on Instagram

## Quotation 7

*“Without stones there is no arch.”*

This quote is an answer from Marco Polo at the end of chapter five. He was responding to Kublai Khan, who had asked him about the arch that was built by the stones. The quote answered my hesitation for developing my thesis based on *Invisible Cities*, which has inspired numerous artworks. Polish translator Charles S. Kraszewski points out a similar view of translations. “The critical translator sets about translating a work already extant in the target language, not because the existing translation is faulty, but rather because none of the existing translations contain his own, valid interpretation of the original work,” (Kraszewski) Most existing artworks inspired by *Invisible Cities* are drawings, paintings, or from an architecture aspect. My translation of the book, with a live performance design background, aims to offer another interpretation of the original work. “It also stands to reason that the more translations of a given work exist, the closer we are to understanding that work more fully, for each critical look at a work of art adds something to our understanding.” (Kraszewski) The making of art, for me, is to participate in conversations.

This quote also encourages me to develop my projects in different formats to understand and contribute to the original content, *Invisible Cities*.



Illustration 7: Quote 7 on Instagram

## Quotation 8

*“Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.”*

The quote from Marco Polo resonated with my foreign culture experience. The influences of my cultural background and of my personal experience are my roots, and they unavoidably became my aesthetic. The forms for the three projects are decided based on my personal interest in handwriting, photography, and lighting design. Furthermore, the photography project is purposefully taken in my hometown Taipei. Working with familiar tools and places allows me to really focus on investigating the artistic part of the projects.

Besides the influence of background, the idea of hidden clues in the quote also draws my attention. The visual content in the photography project includes people in a long line, reflections of buildings, and vehicles.

The image content indicates population, habitation, and traffic issues in Taipei.

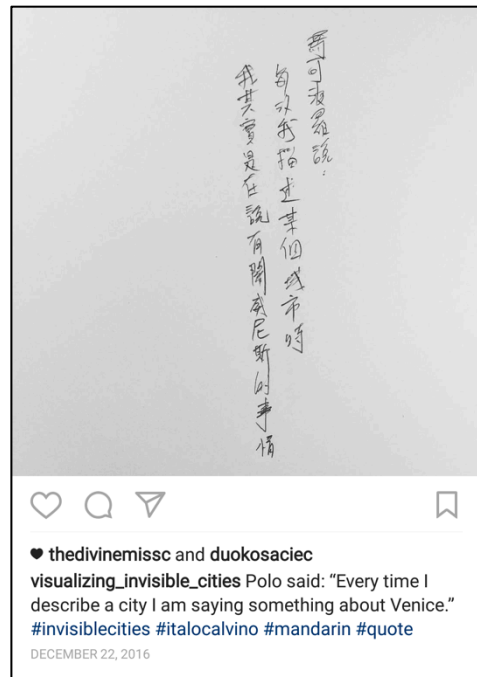


Illustration 8: Quote 8 on Instagram

## Quotation 9

*“Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes,”*

I adopted the idea of seeing a scene from certain perspective to the photography project that capturing ephemeral scenes combining site and reflection from a specific angle. To mimic a travelers’ viewpoint, all photos were shot on the street or in public. As the result, most objects in the photos are constantly moving including people, vehicles, water and reflections of the street. All the images content exists only in the second and are almost impossible to reproduce. Time becomes another factor influenced by both the constantly changing idea from the quote and a traveler’s view.

For the later installation project, the audience could travel around the exhibition space. The changing lighting looks direct the audience’s attention from one object to another. A total of 12 lighting looks created an 18 minutes loop. The same perspective of the exhibition space will not repeat until the next repeated round.

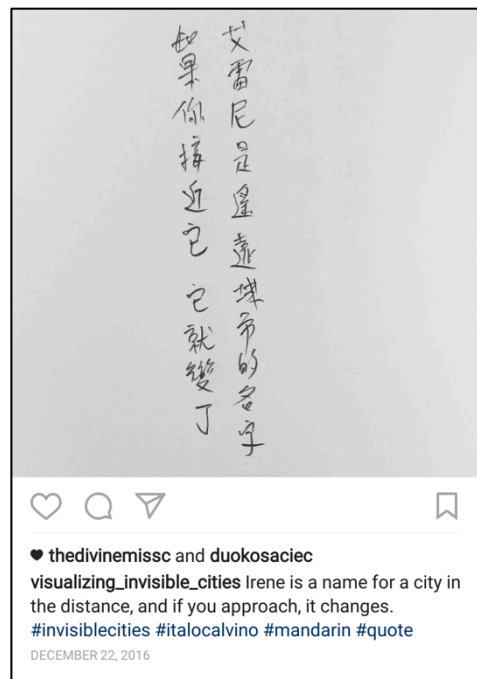


Illustration 9: Quote 9 on Instagram

## Quotation 10

*“Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars.*

*‘There is the blueprint,’ they say.”*

The tenth quote affected how I composed my lighting design for the installation project. Each lighting composition focused on one object at one time in order to clearly show my intention. Individual lighting looks were built and artistically crafted with distinct gestures from a minimally inspired lighting plot. The simplicity allowed viewers to digest the relationship between light sources, reflective objects, and reflected lighting patterns. A quick and clear understanding of the individual looks enabled the viewers to further investigate the whole plot constructed by 12 lighting looks.

The seventh lighting look for the installation project is a direct visual expression of this quote.

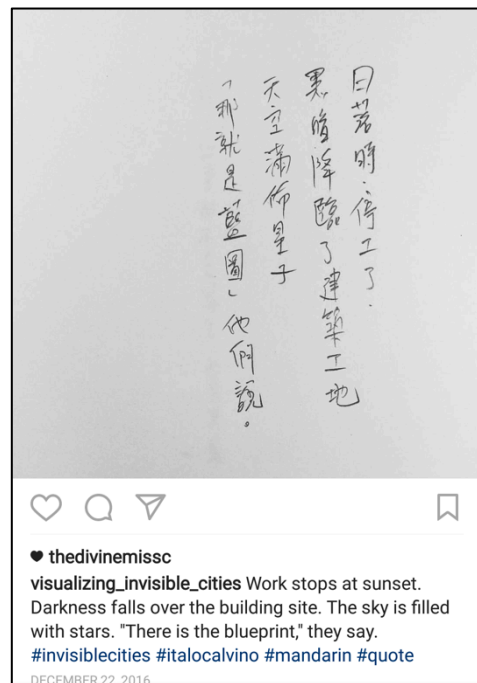


Illustration 10: Quote 10 on Instagram

## Quotation 11

*"It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear,"*

This quote offered me another viewpoint from which to take suggestions and criticism. Feedback is sometimes about the objects but more often about the viewers. Understanding the viewer's background and the perspective helps me to develop my projects. Furthermore, this quote also reminds me to keep an open mind. I prefer my work to be viewed from different perspectives and to communicate with a large audience in order to better participate in the conversation. This quote shaped the aesthetic for the later installation project. The continuous lighting changes are slow, quiet, and meditative.

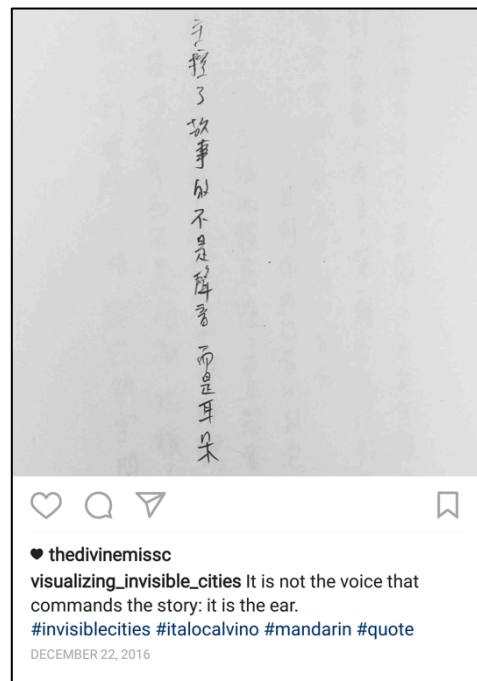


Illustration 11: Quote 11 on Instagram



## Quotation 12

*“the inferno of the living is not something that will be; if therefore is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”*

The last sentences in the whole book resonate my view of the relationship between modern society and art. Making art, for me, is identifying what does not belong to the inferno and giving it space to grow. Making art, for me, is the combination of self-expression and social practice. This quote inspired the tenth lighting look for the installation project, which is the only lighting look with saturated red color.

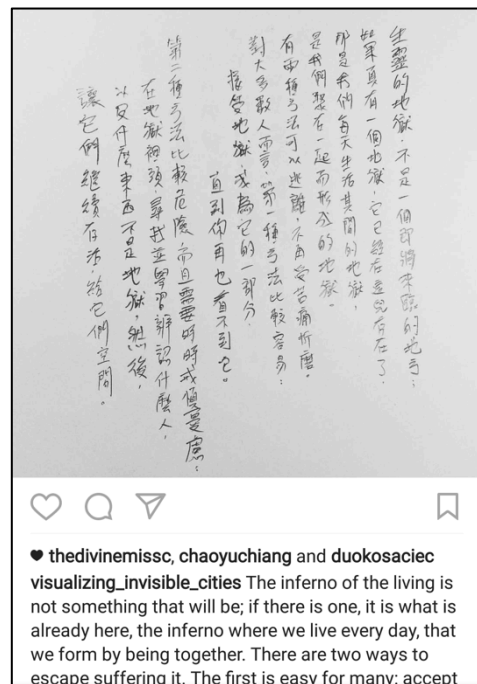


Illustration 12: Quote 12 on Instagram

## Chapter 2: Photography Project

The themes of duality and visibility wave the story content of *Invisible Cities*. The idea of duality is presented by how cities are depicted. All cities could be seen as Marco Polo's travel experience while they could be seen as a concept, an image, or a feeling. Cities constructed by physically possible or impossible ways could be seen as visual representations of desire. "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else." (Calvino, 1978) For the concept of visibility, Calvino shared examples of his visual imagination that influence his writing in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

"When I began to write fantastic stories, I did not yet consider theoretical questions; the only thing I knew was that there was a visual image at the source of all my stories. One of these images was a man cut in two halves, each of which went on living independently. Another example was a boy who climbs a tree and then makes his way from tree to tree without ever coming down to earth. Yet another was an empty suit of armor that moves and speaks as if someone were inside." (Calvino, 1988)

Calvino's viewpoint of the imaginative process leads me to see *Invisible Cities* in another way. A clear understanding of the writing method forms my methodology for the photography and installation project. "The question of the priority of the visual image or verbal expression (which is rather like the problem of the chicken and the egg) tends definitely to lean toward the side of the visual imagination." (Calvino, 1988)

The photography project does not try to capture scenes inspired by the narrative but tends to capture scenes inspired by the original visual images that present through the writing. The later installation project also skips to deciphering the book format but

focuses rather on transforming the original content, which is Calvino's visual imagination.

The themes of duality and visibility lead me to develop my second project in photography format. The visual research and main inspirations for the photography project is a street photographer Vivian Maier's work. Her photographs speak to the duality idea in *Invisible Cities* for three shared qualities. Her photographs capture self-reflection and street scenes, present a traveler's viewpoint, and look unrealistic and poetic.



Illustration 13:  
Vivian Maier Photograph 1 (Maloof)



Illustration 14:  
Vivian Maier Photograph 2 (Maloof)

The photography project, *Visualizing Invisible Cities - Taipei*, translates the thematic idea of duality from the book format into a photography format. The project of 12 photos captures ephemeral scenes combining sight and reflection in Taipei. All photos are shot on the street or in public to mimic a traveler's viewpoint. Most objects in the photos are constantly moving including people, vehicles, water and reflections of the

street. The reflective media include mirrors, windows, and water. The project started in summer 2016 and continued to the end of the following winter.



Illustration 15: Photograph 1



Illustration 16: Photograph 2



Illustration 17: Photograph 3



Illustration 18: Photograph 4



Illustration 19: Photograph 5



Illustration 20: Photograph 6





Illustration 21: Photograph 7



Illustration 22: Photograph 8



Illustration 23: Photograph 9



Illustration 24: Photograph 10



Illustration 25: Photograph 11



Illustration 26: Photograph 12

Photograph 11 and 12 show the young generation's view of extravagant housing prices in Taipei. A perspective of a person's head down looks at the reflection of apartments.

### Chapter 3: Installation Project

My original goal for the installation project was to build 12 objects inspired by the story. I spent some time working on them but shortly realized that it is very hard for me to construct 12 objects that generate curiosity and meaning for my shared artistic community and for myself. Searching for other inspirations, I looked back at my photography project and decided to extend my interest of reflection. As a result, the original idea of 12 objects grew into 12 lighting looks that expressed the reflection of objects in which I developed before.

Another essential inspiration, aside from the novel and the previous two projects, is the concept of materiality in architecture. A quote from Manuel DeLanda's article *The New Materiality* offers a viewpoint for me to approach this concept. "The state in which an organism happens to be at any one moment is actual, while all the other available states are virtual, waiting to be triggered into actuality by a catalyst." (DeLanda, 2015) Light is the catalyst to trigger reflections of my designed objects. The reflected lighting patterns, which are triggered into actuality, become the main component of scenes in the designed installation place. These lighted and reflected scenes could be read as the cities from the original content - *Invisible Cities*.

The installation project, my thesis presentation, attempts to transform inspirations from *Invisible Cities*' writing method and Italo Calvino's philosophy of literature by exploring reflectivity and materiality in a designed installation space. The materials used for the installation include drawing paper and tracing paper. Other reflective materials include mylar, mirrors, and crushed glass. The reflective objects turned into the media of

their reflections, and the reflected lighting patterns on plain paper became primary products. As the result, *Invisible Cities* is both the inspiration for the final product and for the design method that generates the product.

A total of 12 lighting looks composts an endless loop of 18 minutes.



Illustration 26: Lighting Look 1



Illustration 27: Lighting Look 2



Illustration 28: Lighting Look 3



Illustration 29: Lighting Look 4

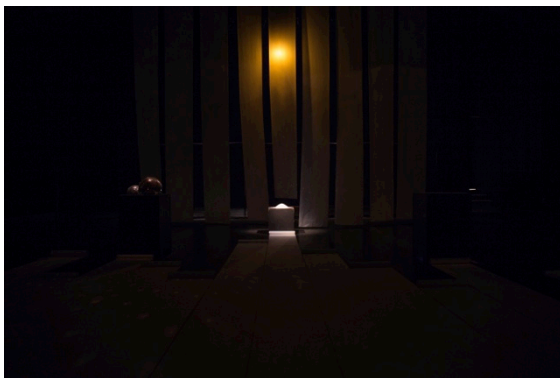


Illustration 30: Lighting Look 5



Illustration 31: Lighting Look 6



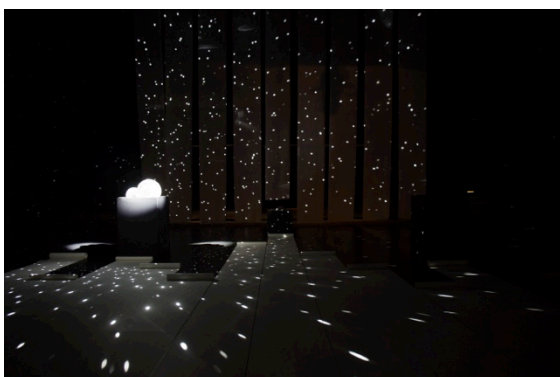


Illustration 32: Lighting Look 7

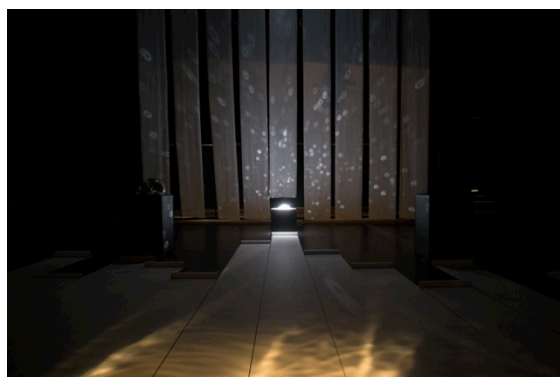


Illustration 33: Lighting Look 8

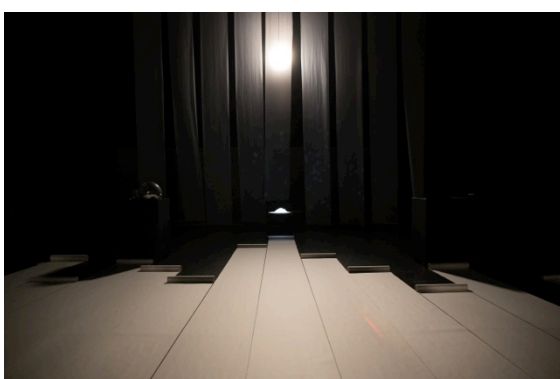


Illustration 34: Lighting Look 9

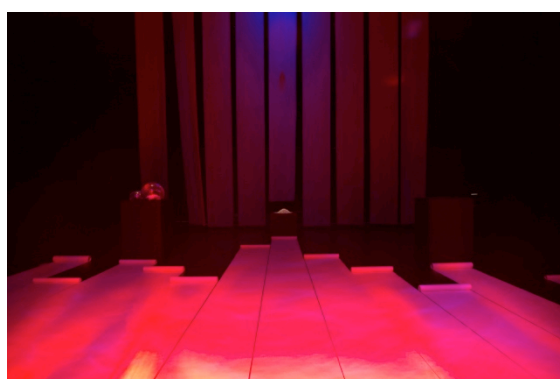


Illustration 35: Lighting Look 10



Illustration 36: Lighting Look 11

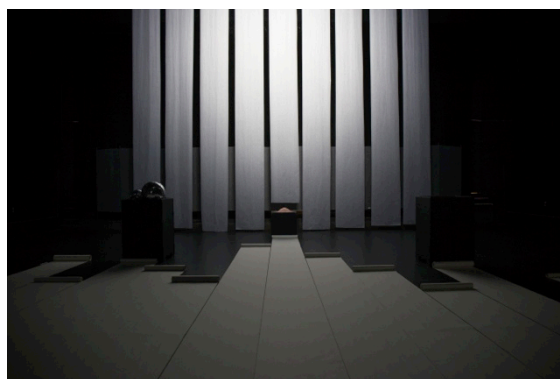


Illustration 37: Lighting Look 12



## Final Reflection

My thesis *Visualizing Invisible Cities* started from Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, developed into the quotation, the photography, and the installation projects, and finally documented in both a written and photographic format. This art journey began from written text, transformed into two-dimensional and three-dimensional artworks, and returned to written text and photo documentary. A circular quest approaches my original concepts for *Invisible Cities* – human's sense and sensibility.

A more complex symbol, which has given me greater possibilities of expressing the tension between geometric rationality and the entanglements of human lives, is that of the city. The book in which I think I managed to say most remains *Invisible Cities*, because I was able to concentrate all my reflections, experiments, and conjectures on a single symbol. (Calvino, 1988)

A city, for me, is a place of discussion.

The development of my thesis project reaches my original goal of seeing how content in stories arouses and translates into different forms. The whole transformational process benefits me, as a theatrical designer, to see the design process in another way including text analysis, research, and translation of ideas from written text to visual language. My thesis also asks me, as an artist, how I see my culture, my generation, and myself.

For the photography project, viewing combination of site and reflections not only adds another layer of interest but also adds another meaning to ordinary life. These combined images may be metaphors for a dual identity phenomenon in my generation, including the virtual and actual, foreign and native, as well as self and other. For further development, the photography style inspired by *Invisible Cities* will be continuously

practiced in cities that I visit in the future.

Mylar, the main inspirational material for the installation project, reflects a dominant interest of my generation – ourselves. Seeing ourselves in others’ artworks might become a visual representation for or a trend of viewing the information explosion era. This highly reflective material will be developed in future installation projects and theatrical designs.

*“The real work consists not in its definitive form,  
but in the series of approximations made to attain it.”*

*(Calvino, 1988)*

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## **Photo Credits**

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